UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/CN.3/1991/L.4/Add.22
12 February 1991

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

STATISTICAL COMMISSION
Twenty-sixth session
4-13 February 1991
Agenda item 15

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON ITS TWENTY-SIXTH SESSION

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: J. A. MWANIKI (Kenya)

Chapter ___. PROGRAMME QUESTIONS: PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES AND PLANNING

Proposed programme of work of the Statistical Office for the biennium 1992-1993 and related information

1. The Commission considered item 13 (b) of its agenda at its 447th and 448th meetings, on 11 and 12 February 1991. It had before it the reports of the Secretary-General on the proposed programme of work of the Statistical Office for the biennium 1992-1993 and the new medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 (E/CN.3/1991/31) and on plans of the international organizations in the area of statistics (E/CN.3/1991/29), a note by the Secretary-General containing the proposed programme of work of the Statistical Office for 1992-1993 and related information (E/CN.3/1991/CRP.1) and the proposed medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 (A/45/6).

2. The Commission considered that its review of the programme of work of the Statistical Office as set out in document E/CN.3/1991/CRP.1 was hampered by a number of constraints and limitations it faced in the review process. It noted that many of those constraints and limitations had already been identified at previous sessions. Others arose out of the new procedures and instructions introduced in connection with the preparation of the proposed programme of work for

the biennium 1992-1993. The problems raised included: (a) limited time in which to consider the proposed programme of work; (b) the strict separation in the procedures between the review of the programme of work and budgetary considerations; (c) limited information on the allocation of real resources; (d) the artificiality of designating low-priority outputs or activities only from those subprogrammes not designated as high priority in the medium-term plan, since in the Commission's view, each subprogramme, regardless of its overall priority, might contain individual outputs or activities that it might wish to designate as high or low priority; (e) the format and terminology of the budget documentation reflected administrative requirements for the Secretariat, but were not readily comprehensible to outsiders; (f) the terms of reference of the Commission in respect of the programme of work were not clear; (g) the difficulty of assimilating in a short time a large number of changes in the proposed programme of work introduced orally by the Secretariat on the basis of the Commission's deliberations, although the Commission recognized the necessity of modifying the proposed programme to reflect its substantive discussions in the course of its current session.

3. In spite of those concerns, the Commission agreed that the proposed programme of work, as modified by the Secretariat, was in line with the Commission's discussions, reflected broadly the priorities and objectives set by the Commission and constituted an appropriate basis for organizing the work of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat in the biennium 1992-1993. The Commission felt that it could not consider each output or activity in detail but noted that it had in fact considered most of them in the course of its current deliberations and that its conclusions had been fully taken into account by the Secretariat in orally revising the programme of work. Furthermore, it noted that in spite of its reservations concerning the information and time available and complexity of the process, high and low priority outputs and activities had been identified in the programme as requested. Accordingly, the Commission endorsed the proposed programme of work as amended. Whether or not the resource requirements of the programme might exceed the zero-growth budget guidelines established for the Organization as a whole, and whether or not any additional resources required for the programme could be reallocated from other parts of the Organization, were questions that the Commission felt not competent to consider.

4. The representative of the United States expressed reservations on that point. It was his delegation's view that in order to accomplish the programme of work proposed by the Secretary-General, a real growth rate appeared to be required. It was the general policy of the United States that no programme of work could be approved unless there was a concomitant increase in real resources. Therefore, the representative of the United States believed the Commission should re-examine the programme of work and eliminate those items of lower priority to achieve a real growth rate. Failing that, the United States delegation could not concur with the proposed programme of work.

5. Strong reservations were expressed about the wisdom of designating low priorities in the manner presented by the Secretariat. It was felt that the new procedure was difficult to understand from the point of view of rational planning.

6. The Commission expressed concern at the apparent decline of resources allocated to subprogramme 5 dealing with substantive support for technical cooperation in statistics carried out on behalf of the Department of Technical Cooperation for Development. It noted that activities under subprogramme 5 were largely carried out on the basis of extrabudgetary provisions and that the information on resources contained in document E/CN.3/1991/CRP.1 was limited to regular budget resources. Moreover, owing to the uncertainties arising from new agency support cost arrangements scheduled to go into operation at the start of 1992, as discussed under agenda item 11 (a), the Commission was informed that it was not possible to project the level of extrabudgetary resources available in the next biennium.

7. The Commission expressed general concern at the late distribution of the documents for the session. In the light of the fact that members must consult with other colleagues both within their own substantive areas and related offices so as to be able to accurately reflect national concerns, there was a strong request that every effort be made to provide documentation for future sessions of the Commission well in advance. The Commission noted that in the modifications to the programme of work a reduction of reports to the Commission was recommended and that the reduction in documentation for the next session should promote timeliness.

8. The Commission particularly reaffirmed the highest priority for the completion of SNA. It was also felt that attention should be given to addressing the needs of transition countries that were in the process of moving from centrally planned economies to market economies. The Commission noted with approval that the Handbook on National Accounting: Application of the SNA in Transition Countries, which was accorded high priority, was a direct response to that need. It also was in full agreement with placing highest priority on the SNA Handbook on Inflation Accounting and various activities related to the transition from ISIC, Rev.2, to ISIC, Rev.3.

9. There was broad support for the further development of environment statistics, particularly reformulated to reflect the specific outputs and objectives as modified by the discussions and conclusions of previous sessions. The Commission endorsed the further development of the programme in the area of environmental accounting, development of world-level classifications based on the work of the Conference of European Statisticians and other core activities as agreed on by the Commission under agenda item 9 (e).

10. The Commission generally supported the reduced percentage of resources for compilation and dissemination activities, but agreed that that should result from efficiency gains not reductions in outputs. The Commission was concerned that the quality and tim iness of the recurrent publications might be jeopardized since subprogrammes 2 and 3 were not accorded high priority. Several agencies noted the great importance of timely, comprehensive and reliable statistics in recurrent publications prepared by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat. They also supported the view that recurrent statistical publications should be reviewed with a view to improving relevance, timeliness and reliability. The Commission noted that the proposed programme of work made provision for an expert group meeting to study and revise the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics and the

Statistical Yearbook, with a view to improving timeliness, efficiency and relevance to a wide range of users.

11. The Commission was pleased to note that specific outputs/activities in subprogrammes 2 and 3 were directed towards the improvement of the trade statistics database (COMTRADE) so that users of external trade statistics would receive the data in a better and more timely manner. It was noted that the number of countries in the COMTRADE database had been increased and attention was being given to improving the quality of the data.

12. A suggestion was made that work on the International Comparison Programme (ICP) should be accorded high priority. In that connection, the Commission noted that the modified work programme made provision for the preparation and publication of the Informational Brochure on the International Comparison Programme and for the substantive and technical servicing of the Intersecretariat Working Group for ICP.

13. On the question of coordination, concern was expressed that there might be a disproportionate emphasis on demographic and social statistics in comparison with economic statistics. The question arose whether efforts had been made to coordinate activities of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat with those of the Population Division. The Commission noted that, in fact, there was an efficient division of labour between those two offices, which worked closely together.

Action taken by the Commission

14. The Commission:

(a) Approved the proposed programme of work of the Statistical Office for the biennium 1992-1993 as contained in the note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/1991/CRP.1), as orally revised, subject to the comments made;

(b) Approved the priorities designated in the note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/1991/CRP.1), as orally revised and subject to the comments of the Commission;

(c) Requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to provide information on the proposed programme of work for the biennium 1994-1995 to the Commission at its twenty-seventh session in a more simplified format.